

Editorial: EXCESSIVE - Community college regents blissfully out of touch

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If you read Bill Bartleman's story Wednesday on college tuition, a couple of figures might have jumped out at you.

First, average annual tuition at the 16 campuses of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System is \$713 more than the national average for community colleges (\$3,450 v. \$2,737). This in a state that ranks fifth from the bottom in per capita income.

Second, after raising tuition 151 percent in the last decade, the KCTCS Board of Regents has asked for another 13 percent increase for next year.

We'll be outraged in a moment, but for now we are still too stunned. Apparently the regents didn't get the memo that we are in a recession.

Fortunately, the Kentucky Council for Postsecondary Education responded appropriately to the KCTCS: "Are you nuts?" OK, those weren't the exact words. Council President Brad Cowgill actually called the request "clearly excessive."

We vaguely recall the General Assembly issuing a mandate to the state's institutions of higher education to double the number of Kentucky residents with college degrees by 2020. The community college system must have confused the mandate to mean doubling the cost of an education. If so, they've met the goal and then some.

Had the KCTCS regents set out to prevent students from enrolling, they could not have designed a more effective means.

The rise of community college tuition is only slightly less outrageous than increases at state universities. At least there, the boards of regents recognized this year that in this struggling economy it would be foolish to expect consumers -- students and their parents -- to make up for cuts in general fund appropriations by the legislature.

The increases that other institutions asked for make Murray State's modest request of 6 percent all the more remarkable. That is about what the Council on Postsecondary Education will probably approve statewide.

Gov. Paul Patton created the Kentucky Community and Technical College System in 1997 and, in so doing, severed their relationship with the University of Kentucky. Organized ostensibly to increase efficiency, the system instead mushroomed into another state bureaucracy with an insatiable appetite. It was a classic example of needless government expansion at taxpayer expense.

Community college students are non-traditional. As a rule they are older, working, commuter students with families who take courses as they can work them into their busy lives. They generally can't afford to be full-time students. Community colleges have

traditionally provided an affordable alternative to four-year colleges and universities.

But the "affordable" part is rapidly vanishing.

Cowgill is not so hard on the institutions. "There are no villains in this story," he said, explaining that college boards have raised tuition because general fund appropriations have not kept pace with increased higher education costs. At the same time, he said, "Rates of increase we have seen in the recent years are not sustainable."

It's a relief to see the council taking a balanced approach rather than rubber stamping the requests from the universities -- and particularly the community college system. But it is still disturbing that the KCTCS appears incurably out of touch.

Maybe some of the C